

Being in touch with our Feelings

Hemispheric Integration

Based on the model of Daniel Siegel (Siegel 2007; 2010)

This paper includes a brief discussion on Affect Labelling as an important aspect of Mindfulness

Preamble

In his remarkable book on Mindsight, Daniel Siegel suggests that mental disharmony is caused by a lack of integration in various domains. If we have a problem in expressing our feelings, or feel feelingless, this may originate from a lack of integration between the two hemispheres of the brain: the solution here therefore is to develop skills that allow for integration between the two hemispheres (horizontal integration).

Over the last couple of decades neuro-science has established that the brain is far more “plastic” than was previously thought: this means that even as adults we can change in profound ways; our neuro-circuits are not fixed, and so our “dysfunctional” circuits can be changed by skilful means. Siegel gives a quite extraordinary example of this in a ninety three year old man called “Stuart” who he sees for counselling / psychotherapy (Siegel 2010 pp 102-119). Since early childhood, Stuart had lost touch with his feelings: during his sessions with Siegel, he (Stuart) gets back into contact with his feelings and his life becomes transformed. It is a very moving story.

What follows is a brief account of some of the ways that can help us to re-integrate with our feelings – and thus re-integrate the two hemispheres. It may be helpful to read this paper in conjunction with C6, a general introduction to integration.

Note: the functions of the two hemispheres are subtly different. In right handed people*, the left hemisphere tends towards language, logic, linear, verbal, and analytical domains, while the right hemisphere tends towards non-verbal, intuitive, non-linear, metaphoric, & feeling domains – and a more holistic and integrative function (ability to synthesise different ideas and feelings). For further details, see Figure 4 in appendix to this paper.

(*In left handed people the situation is variable and complex – see McGilchrist 2009 e.g. pp 11-13).

Some approaches to integrating feelings and the two hemispheres.

1. Bodily Sensations

Over time we can become out of touch with our bodies: in other words, we no longer register when the body is sending messages to the brain about the internal state of some part of the body / organ.

- The body scan in Autogenic Training¹ can help us begin to get in touch with our bodies.
- Each Standard Exercise gives us a further opportunity to tune in to what is happening in the body.
- As we focus on a part of the body – say the foot or the dominant arm – this will be associated with messages being relayed from that part of the body up to: the brain stem, the limbic system, the insular cortex, and then finally to the Pre-Frontal Cortex (see Figure 1).
- Activation of the Pre-Frontal Cortex can help us develop mindfulness and the ability to reframe / re-appraise (see also C3 and D1 on this website).
- If we focus on both arms, or both legs, and are able to get a sense of both together, this suggests that communications between the left and the right side of the brain is being established (Siegel 2010 p 112). Some of us find this (i.e. focusing on both sides of the body simultaneously) difficult: but with practice and application it usually becomes possible.
- The ability to focus on the internal state of our body (interoception²) – such as the heartbeat or inner aspects of the abdomen such as the stomach – is mediated mainly through the right brain [right middle pre-frontal cortex] (Siegel 2010 p 113). So focusing for example on the heart will help to facilitate right brain activity – and so may be a stepping stone to getting more in touch with our feelings. This is illustrated schematically in Figure 1.

¹ Note that in the Body Scan associated with Mindfulness Meditation, the Body Scan is much longer than in Autogenic Training, and so (in Meditation) we may dwell on different parts of the body for extended periods of time: this is also a very good way of becoming in touch with our bodies.

² Our perception of the internal bodily state.

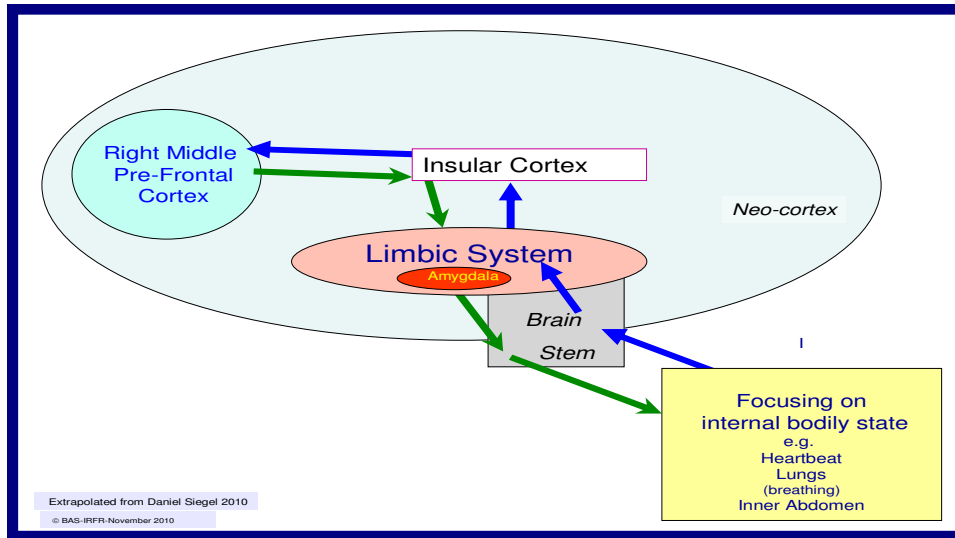


Figure 1
Focusing on the internal state of the body is mediated through the
Right Medial (Middle) Pre-Frontal Cortex

Comments on Figure 1

- The **green arrows** schematically illustrate the neural pathways when we decide to focus on, say: the heartbeat, or how our inner abdomen is feeling.
- The **blue arrows** show the return neural route.
- Note that these circuits overlap with our “Resonance Circuits” (C3).
- The implication of all this is that disciplines such as Autogenic Training and Meditation can foster the development of the Resonance Circuits (embracing empathy) and also increase right brain activity.
- The right side of the brain is crucial for mediating our feelings (felt emotions).

2. Non-verbal dynamics

The Right Hemisphere, as indicated above, processes non-verbal communications. When we were very small, before we developed speech, our mode of communication with our mother / care-giver would of course have been non-verbal. In these early months of life, the right side of the brain is actually growing faster than the left side (Schoore 2003B pp 116-117; 221; and Schoore 2003C pp 112-115).

So, in this context, the Right Hemisphere is preferentially concerned with the interior world of what is going on within the body and with feelings³. Siegel introduces three specific ways of addressing and improving our non-verbal modalities:

- We can make a face, and then ask our partner to name the emotion we are expressing.
- We can then get our partner to imitate the face we have just made (and vice versa; see also Figure 2).
- Finally, a good practice is to watch a suitable film (TV /DVD) with the sound off, and try to work out what is going on and what is being felt simply by observation.



Figure 2
Naming emotions with a friend / partner / therapist can help us to develop
the non-verbal / feeling part of our brains.

Note: there is also some evidence that naming the emotion / feeling that we are experiencing can help settle a disturbing emotion. It thus helps to soothe⁴ our inner being (Siegel 2007 p 278; Siegel 2010 p 116; Creswell 2007); it may also help us to develop Mindfulness and Mindsight. This is sometimes called Affect Labelling.

³ Note that we need, of course, both hemispheres for health. For example, brain imaging studies indicate that activation of the left pre-frontal cortex is associated with an approach state in which “we seek out and open ourselves to new experiences” (Siegel 2010 p 113).

⁴ In Paul Gilbert’s model, this is activating our Soothing and Contentment system – which is associated with the release of endorphins and oxytocin (Gilbert 2009).

3. Imagery

Imagery and imagination are mediated mainly by the Right Hemisphere.

- If at the end of an Autogenic (or Meditation) session, we imagine a tranquil scene from a holiday, then we will be re-creating that scene “as if” it were actually taking place in this Present Moment. This is one way of facilitating the Relaxation Response, and overlaps with the concept of a safe “inner mental room” used in Positive Mental Training (Dobbin 2006): with time and practice this can help us to get in touch with our feelings.
- Imagining something is different from describing it. A helpful exercise can be to describe in words what we are imagining, or describe in words what it felt like walking on a beach in a gale.
- When we access in our imagination some event or situation that we were involved in, this is activating our Autobiographical Memory, which is mediated by the right hemisphere – so again this is a good exercise for increasing our right brain functions and communications.
- Note that Autobiographical Memory is not intrinsically in verbal or word form; so it actually has to be decoded into words for us to be able to share the memory with another person (Siegel 2010 p 114).
- Drawing and painting also are associated with right hemisphere neuro-circuits.

4. Feelings and Words.

As indicated in 1 above, simply by focusing on part of the body can get us in touch with the feeling of what is going on in our body. This is an excellent stepping stone to becoming more in touch with our affect (emotional) feelings.

- We can become more proficient at feeling our feelings by mindful practices such as Autogenic Training.
- In addition, writing down our experiences of feelings can also be of great benefit. One of the most helpful aspects of the Autogenic Training Diary is to be able to note down, or notate down, what feelings we are experiencing during the Standard Exercise sequence. [Note that diary keeping has been shown to be an “effective component of (AT) treatment” (Stetter & Kupper 2002; referring to the work of Krampen 1991)].

Many of us, during the course of growing up, can become out of touch with our feelings, which is one of the main concerns of this web-page.

Some of us, though, may have the opposite problem: that we are too in touch with our feelings – some of which may be very painful and disturbing. In this situation, practising an Autogenic Sequence can have a stabilising effect.

- Note that, in this situation, if a disturbing feeling does arise we can then express it with words such as: “Anger is arising within me”. Notice that this is different from saying “I am angry” – which implies that the anger may be taking us over.
- In the expression “Anger is arising in me” we are to some extent depersonalising the anger: we are not our anger, and so we can comment on it as a “mindful observer”.
- Naming an affect (Affect Labelling) soothes the limbic system and reduces the activity of the amygdala (e.g. Daniel 2010 p 116; Creswell 2007).

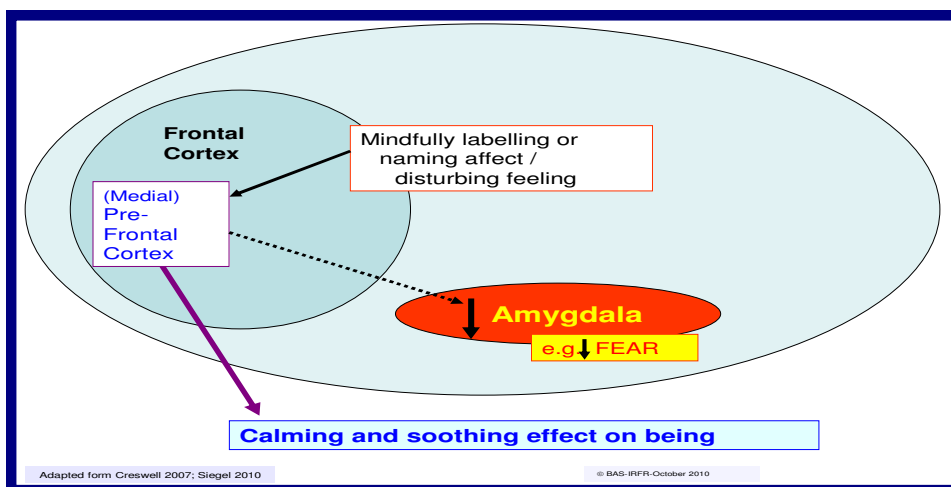


Figure 2
Mindfully naming Negative Affect can reduce its potency in the context of on-going Mental Training such as Meditation / Autogenic Training

Integration of feelings and Resonance Circuits

Several of the neuro-circuits described above overlap with the Resonance Circuits that can help us develop empathy and deep understanding of others (see C3). So, not surprisingly, as we develop our skills at becoming more in touch with our feelings we also, at the same time, axiomatically become more empathic.

Figure 3 summarises some of the key processes discussed in this article.

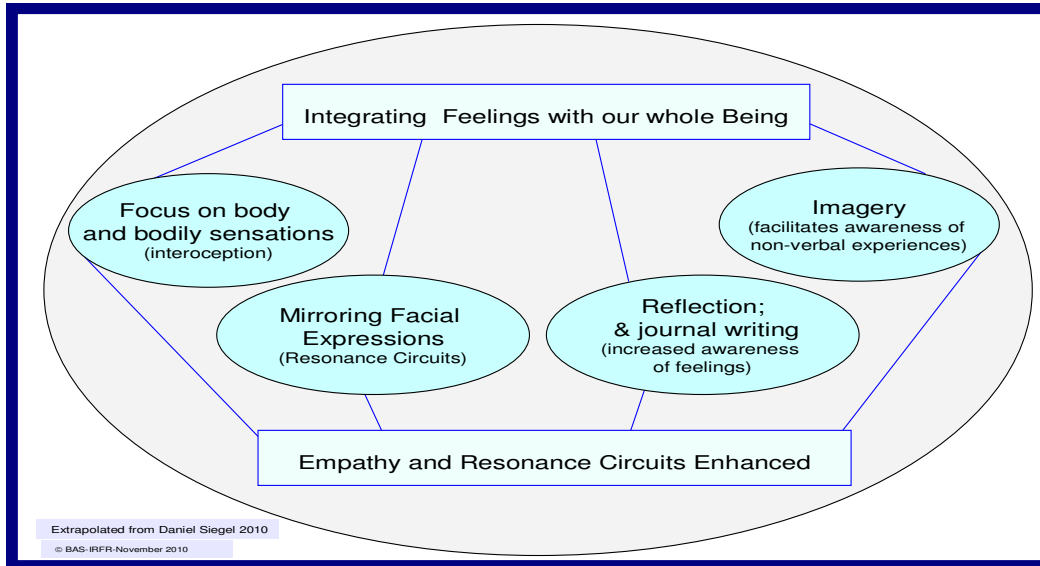


Figure 3

Some of the disciplines that facilitate integration of feelings and can thus lead to increased empathy and concern for the wellbeing of others.

Comments on Figure 3.

All the connections are two way.

We can facilitate the development of empathy / our Resonance Circuits in one of two basic ways.

- i. If we decide that we are not in touch with our feelings, we can work on any or all of the four central oval areas. These in turn will strengthen the Resonance Neural Circuits – and our capacity for empathy and attunement to ourselves and others.
- ii. Regular practice of Meditation-type disciplines, such as Autogenic Training, will itself help us to become in touch with our feelings, and facilitate hemispheric integration⁵.

Note that hemispheric integration – and becoming in touch with our feelings, does not come about simply by thinking about it: rather, we have to mentally decide that we are going to deal with the matter – for example, by one or more of the methods / disciplines discussed in this paper: and then apply ourselves to that modality. Note also that these modalities are experiential rather than cognitive / analytical modalities (see B10). These approaches will help us to flow in the “river of integration” discussed in C6: “Integration and Well-Being”.

Appendix /

⁵ Meditative type practices change our neuro-physiology – and so our whole body-mind-state. They thus get to the heart of the matter – see also B10 and B11.

AppendixHemispheric functions
A brief summary of some differences

The functions of the two hemispheres are subtly different. As implied in this article, mental health and well being imply that the functions of the two hemispheres are integrated.

Figure 4 below gives a summary of some of the major differences between the two hemispheres in right hand people⁶.

LEFT HEMISPHERIC FUNCTIONS / DYNAMICS	RIGHT HEMISPHERIC FUNCTIONS / DYNAMICS
Verbal	Non-verbal
Language related	Visio-spatial
Linguistic matters	“Spacio-cognitive maps”
Greater language acquisition ability	“Contextual understanding of meaning” [*] ; Metaphor ^{**}
Sequential / serial / linear type processing	Simultaneous / in parallel type processing
Temporal ordering	Present-moment centredness
Succession; duration; causality (Ornstein 1977)	Timeless perspective (Lee 1973)
“Clock perspective”	Non-clock (time) perspective
Analytical	Synthesis type abilities
Rational	Intuitive
Particularly suited to “scientific” rational (reductive) type perspectives	Holistic
	Ability to grasp patterns of relationships
	Gestalt
	Preferentially processes unconscious dynamics (Schore 2003A; 2003B; 2003C p 9)
	Dream type experiences
	Symbolic orientation
	“Eastern type thought”
“Fact” based orientation	
“Western type thought”	

Figure 4
Some suggested basic differences in hemispheric functions / dynamics
[Mainly based on Iaccino 1993 pp 1 – 48^{*}; & ^{**} McGilchrist 2009 e.g. pp 49-51]
[This Figure is reproduced from Ross 2010; page 30, Figure 1.10]

For a detailed and in-depth study of Hemispheric Functions and modern western society, please see Iain McGilchrist’s monumental “The Master and his Emissary” (McGilchrist 2009).

Sources and References /

⁶ As already mentioned (on page 1), in left handed people matters are complex, and are not simply the reverse of Figure 4 (McGilchrist 2009 pp 11-13).

Sources and References

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Linked themes in this Autogenic Dynamics section

A2	Autogenic Training Meta-analysis (Stetter and Kupper 2002)
B10	Snakes, Conditioned Stimuli, and Equanimity – Approaches to treating mind-body disturbances
C2	Mindsight – our seventh sense – and associated middle pre-frontal cortex functions
C3	Resonance Circuits, Mirror Neurones, and Mindfulness
C6.	Integration and Well Being
D1	Reflections on foundations for Mindful Living